

Sermon March 20 2022

Are you anxious about the wrong things?

Luke 13:1-9

There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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Our gospel lesson begins with a conversation about a group of Galileans who openly rebelled against the civil authorities. They were in Jerusalem to worship and make sacrifices to God. Pilate, it seems, sent his soldiers into the temple to kill them. And there on the altar they died, with their own blood mixing with their sacrifices. It was indeed a scandal. Luke records this as if the events were well known to everyone present, which no doubt they were. But in our time the details have long passed into obscurity.

The Bible only tells this story in passing. This is the only citation we have. There are no secular sources that confirm it or give any details. The historian Josephus, however, gave several accounts of other nasty things that Pilate did that are just as scandalous, making this story more than plausible. For example, he wanted to make civil improvements to the city and to build an aqueduct from the pool of Solomon to the city center. That in itself was controversial. But he intended to have the Jews pay for it. They refused. Bad idea. He had his soldiers invade the Temple and take what he needed from the treasury. This didn't sit well with the people. My understanding is that a group of Galileans led a delegation demanding the return of the stolen money. Pilate dispersed into the crowd several of his guards, undercover and in disguise, who upon a signal from Pilate pulled out daggers and slaughtered some 3,000 in the crowd, bringing the protest to a swift end. This doesn't seem to be the same incident, but it speaks to Pilate's brutality.

A bunch of seditious Galileans (apparently there were enough zealots and insurrectionists among the Galileans that the terms were nearly synonymous) were taking refuge in the Temple... Holy Ground. Safe Space, you might think. But not so. Pilate marches his soldiers into the sanctuary and has them slaughtered like animals before their God. It was shocking.

Now it seems like from the conversation with Jesus that we were NOT privy to that these men must have had it coming to them to die such a scandalous death. That interpretation doesn't seem to be very

sympathetic to the Galileans. I used to find that strange. But I'm discovering that it's very possible to have a nation so divided against itself as to be able to have NO COMPASSION, sympathy or understanding for segments of their OWN people. So I'm not so confused as I used to be about why they would consider their own brothers worthy of dying so gruesomely upon God's altar.

Jesus' answer to them is along the lines of... "Oh? You think they deserved to die this way because they are worse sinners than everybody else? Hmm... ??? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Everybody seems to like to point fingers. Remember, Jesus says "Before you try and take the splinter out of someone else's eye... mind the BEAM in your own."

"You think these guys were bad? You think they deserved a horrible death? I have grim news for you, bucko. Unless you repent... YOU TOO are deserving of a death just like that one."

OUCH. That was unexpected.

And, as long as we are on the topic of dying a shocking and unexpected and sudden death, Jesus suggests another case. What about all those who were not doing anything deserving of death? How about all those who were just minding their own business when the tower of Siloam fell? We don't get the details of this story either. Once again it seems well known to the group while not being important enough to travel down through history. But then with so much tragic death throughout the centuries, these kinds of things are all too common. And that's the point.

Bad things happen... even to people minding their own business. Do you think they deserved it? Maybe one or two... but all of them? Does everyone who dies when a commuter plane crashes "deserve" it? Babies? Mothers? Husbands just earning a living?

"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

What does that mean? I get the part about YOU, TOO, WILL LIKEWISE PERISH. Nobody gets out of this world alive. Death comes to us all eventually. I can choose to "NOT THINK ABOUT IT," try and ignore it... but I do know what it means.

It's that other part... the "Unless you repent" part... I'm a little fuzzy on that one.

Repent: It means to turn around my life. But what does that mean?
Jesus anticipates the question and tells us this little parable...

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir,

let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...

Remember that John the Baptist says this to the Pharisees who are coming out in the desert to check on him... to spy on him.

“You brood of poisonous snakes... who warned you to flee the coming wrath... the ax is already laid at the root of the tree. And every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down.”

John is using the same metaphor here. The image of a tree producing fruit.

There are at least two ways to think of repentance. The first is the idea of turning away from sin, living a different life. A life that endeavors to be good and do good work. And that follows the second idea of repentance, that which is focused on feeling bad about our sinful behavior, feeling sorry for our sins and changing our attitude in response to those feelings.

Except that none of that sounds very Lutheran to me.

And what doesn't sound very Lutheran is the encouragement to A.) Focus on our feelings or B.) Focus on doing good works. That sounds terrible to a lot of Christians who think that as Christians we SHOULD focus on those things.

Our focus should be on what Jesus does... Not WHAT WE DO. But we should also be MOVED by what Jesus has done for us, such that we RESPOND to his love by being loving, ourselves. And when we ARE what we have been called to be we will respond in ways that bear much fruit... GOOD FRUIT.

St. Paul tells us that we are no longer OF THE FLESH, but OF the SPIRIT. And we produce the fruit of the Spirit. Not of the flesh.

The Fruits of the Spirit are LOVE, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This is what God wants to see produced in us, through the working of a repentant heart.

It's not moping around with a broken heart or being ignorantly optimistic. It's not earning respect by being a goody two shoes, in uncritical, slave like obedience to the latest virtue signal of the week. It's also not being careless of other people in need.

As I read this lesson, I take away the idea that the people talking with Jesus were upset with the state of the world. They wanted justice, but they were upset... angry and fearful about the wrong things.

And when I look at it that way, it seems very much like the world we are living in today. That people on all sides of the political and social spectrum are UPSET and ANGRY and even AFRAID at the state of the world we live in... Point fingers at the WORST of all sinners... Throwing labels around that dehumanize and make people the targets of other peoples' hate and anxiety.

Watching the world these days is anxiety producing. As prices rise, and resources are scarce, who is to blame? Point your finger in any direction, but don't point it at yourselves.

Yet that is just where Jesus is telling us to look.

Don't fuss too much about all the other bad guys around... but make sure YOU are focused on the right things. This is Jesus, giving us perspective. If you are angry or anxious or afraid, maybe you should be angry, anxious, or afraid about the *right* things. And REPENT because the kingdom of heaven is near.

Lately I've been dealing with a lot of anxious thoughts. But when I sat down to pray about them the other night it seems that God had me ask a question. *Whose life is so perfect that you would trade your troubles for theirs?* And I could think of a lot of people who I *wouldn't* want to trade with. My grandmother used to say that if you put everyone's troubles into a pile in the middle of the room, you would no doubt pull your own troubles back out, rather than take anyone else's for your own. I think repentance must begin with gratitude toward God. And then we can love our neighbor as ourselves. Turn away from the world's priorities...

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

And finally, anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. So let's be kind to one another.